



# The Conestoga Wagon



## **THE CONESTOGA WAGON**

**Prepared by the Staff of the  
Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County  
1953**

One of a historical series, this pamphlet is published under the direction of the governing Boards of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County.

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## FOREWORD

The water-color picture of the famed Conestoga wagon hanging on the east wall of the lobby of the central building of the Public Library was drawn, colored, and mounted by the Library's personnel. It is exhibited in a frame made by the Library's cabinetmaker.

Many of Fort Wayne's early settlers doubtless arrived in Conestoga wagons. For over a century wagons of this type were widely used in the United States.

The following excerpts, reprinted from Chapter IV of Edwin Valentine Mitchell's *IT'S AN OLD PENNSYLVANIA CUSTOM*, clearly describe the Conestoga wagon, the horses, and the wagoners. The account is skillfully written and should prove interesting to many Library patrons.

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Famed in American annals for the part it played in the development of the country, the Conestoga wagon was purely a Pennsylvania production. It originated among the Dutch farmers of the Conestoga Valley in Lancaster County, where lived the last of the Conestoga Indians. In order to get their produce to market and haul in supplies, these farmers needed large, sturdy wagons that could be used on the roughest roads. To meet this transport problem the local carpenters, wheelwrights, and blacksmiths combined to produce the Conestoga wagon, which became the "in-land ship" or "frigate" of commerce and, eventually, the "prairie schooner." These nautical nicknames were not so farfetched as may be supposed. There was something oceanic in the spectacle of vast fleets of these whitetops rolling across the land. Three thousand of them rumbled regularly in and out of Philadelphia, and as many as a thousand were to be seen at one time with their boat-shaped bodies backed up along Market Street, discharging and loading cargo.

It is difficult to see how a better wagon than the Conestoga could have been devised for the general purpose it was intended to serve and did serve from 1750 to 1850. Designed to carry loads of from four to six tons over bad roads and through steeply-banked streams, it was of necessity a well-constructed vehicle, with great wide-tired wheels intended to stay up on soft ground. Although these wagons were not all built exactly alike, all possessed certain features that set them apart from other covered wagons and made them easily identifiable.

The white top of the typical Conestoga wagon dipped in the center and flared out over the ends like an old-fashioned lady's bonnet. Stretched over a dozen hickory bows fixed in sockets, the hempen cover measured twenty-four feet from end to end and at the front and rear peaks was eleven feet from the ground. Lashed

down at the sides and drawn together at the ends, it protected the contents of the wagon, which was generally loaded to the hoops, from dust and rain.

To prevent the load from shifting against the ends when steep grades were negotiated, the wagon bottom dipped toward the middle in boat-fashion. Indeed, a Conestoga wagon without its top rather resembled a dory on wheels. The wagon bed measured sixteen feet in length and was wide enough to accommodate two flour barrels abreast of each other or a single hogshead.

The large rear wheels were five or six feet in diameter, with rims sometimes nearly a foot wide. Amidships on the left-hand side of the wagon was the slant-lidded toolbox with ornamental iron hinges. Just above this was the lazy board which pulled out like a shelf from the side and on which the driver could ride, sitting or standing. Across the rear end hung the feedbox. This could be detached and placed on the pole for the horses to eat from when they were unhitched. Every wagon carried a water bucket and a tar bucket.

All Conestoga wagons were painted the same colors--red wheels, red sideboards, and blue running gear. There was never any deviation from this color scheme.

While the driver of a six-horse Conestoga wagon sometimes found it convenient to ride on the lazy board, particularly when he wanted to operate the brake, he almost always rode the nigh wheel horse. This was the horse next to the wagon pole on the left-hand side, the off horse being on the right. In passing traffic coming from the opposite direction the driver could manage his horses and wagon better by keeping to the right-hand side of the road, and from this practice of the Conestoga wagoners came the universal American custom of keeping to the right.





THE CONESTOGA HORSE

Quite as remarkable as the wagons were the horses bred to draw them. America has developed only three or four distinctive breeds of horses--the Narraganset pacer, the Morgan, the gaited Kentucky, and the Conestoga. Like the Narraganset pacer of Colonial times, the Conestoga horse is now extinct, and its ancestry, like the Morgan's, is unknown. But it was one of the finest draft horses ever bred--solid, chunky, and possessing extraordinary endurance. It stood from sixteen and a half to seventeen and a half hands high and weighed around sixteen hundred pounds. Most of these horses were black, but as a result of mixed breeding there were bays, dapple grays, and some sorrels. The usual number of horses used was six, but spans of four and eight with sometimes an extra horse in the lead were also employed. According to Henry K. Landis, who is an authority on the Conestoga wagon and the Conestoga horse and everything pertaining to them, the wheel horses, which had to do the backing and turning, were the heaviest pair, while the lightest and most spirited span acted as leaders. With a load of about a ton to a horse, they traveled at the rate of twelve or fourteen miles a day.

The harness was always the best that could be procured--heavy harness for the heavy spans, lighter harness for the lighter pairs. The owners loved to deck their horses with bearskin or deerskin housings and bridles decorated with rosettes and loops of red trimming. Above the hames was a set of openmouthed bells, generally four in number, suspended in a bow, like Russian saddle chimes. They were made of genuine bell metal and were finely toned. "In the harness and trimmings," reads an old report, "the owners frequently indulged in expenses that approached extravagance." In traveling through villages and pike towns the sound of the Conestoga bells brought people to doorways and windows to admire the horses and wag-



The wagoners drank, sang, and danced in the wayside hostelryes ~



ons as they passed. A wagon with its six horses stretched out to a length of sixty feet.

The wagoners were a rough-and-ready crew--hard-working, hard-swearing, hard-drinking. But there was a splendid spirit of comradeship among them, and in case of a breakdown or mishap on the road they willingly helped each other when asked to do so. A curious custom among them was that a driver who went to another's rescue was entitled to the other's horse bells, and the only way the latter could replace them was by helping some other driver in misfortune. At the wagon stands on cold winter nights the younger men deferred to the older ones, giving them the best places near the fire in the common room, where they unfurled their bedding and slept on the floor. Each driver carried in his wagon a mattress of shoulder width and his own blankets. On summer nights they sometimes bivouacked under the stars.

The wagoners drank, sang, and danced in the wayside hostelries. Old Monongahela whisky was three cents a glass, two for five, and a meal, twelve and a half cents. They smoked long, rank, pencil-like cigars which were four for a cent and were called stogies, because they were popular with the Conestoga wagoners. The heavy shoes they wore were also called by that name. The professional wagoners were known as "regulars"; the casual drivers, the farmers with their own wagons, were "militia."

The extensive travel encouraged by the improvement of roads largely increased the number of stagehouses, wagon stands, and drovers' taverns. On the Philadelphia-Lancaster Turnpike there was one for every mile of the road. But those intended for the accommodation of the wagoners were discontinued when the



Conestoga team was superseded by the railway and the canal. Upon the loss of their occupation, the wagoners sang:

Oh, it's once I made money by driving my team,  
But now all is hauled on the railroad by steam.  
May the devil catch the man that invented the plan,  
For it ruined us poor wagoners, and every other man.

The Conestoga wagon moved westward and, in less ponderous form and drawn by oxen instead of horses, became the prairie schooner, the wheels of which rolled across the continent to the Pacific, where it reached its journey's end.

E. V. Mitchell, *IT'S AN OLD PENNSYLVANIA CUSTOM* (New York: Vanguard Press, Inc., 1947), pp. 65-66, 73-78.





